

CHRISTIAN UNITY.

BY

A CATHOLIC CHURCHMAN.

“One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism.”

These words are preceded by an affectionate exhortation: “I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

This is followed by an enumeration of the prominent means which God has prescribed for the edification of his church—the body of Christ—whose substantial unity is here both asserted and described. Do we clearly understand and properly appreciate this Christian unity? The very words fall on our ears like sweet music. Our warm imagination readily surrounds the *sentiment* they express, with a bright and pleasing halo of loveliness and beauty. It is invested with the most attractive charms an active fancy can invent. What delightful pictures present themselves within the magic of its circle! The visionary faculty finds here a sovereign remedy for all the disorders of the Church, and for most of the evils of the world. Rival parties, discordant sects, envious and wrangling classes, with the prejudices, errors, and alienations which they create and foster, would all disappear under the benign influence of its potent spell. “How good and pleasant a thing it is, for brethren to dwell together in unity!” This sounds very well. God forbid that I should un-

dervalue, much less disparage, the important and blessed truth which underlies it. But it is well, sometimes, to consider precisely what we mean by terms that we habitually employ. Much of the talk, which, of late, has become common about Christian unity, is mere cant or sentimentalism. It is unmated with any clear conception of Gospel truth or of Christian obligation. This has always been a subject most prolific of discussion and controversy. Our Saviour prayed for it; his apostles enjoined it. We pray for it in our closets, in our families, and in our congregations. The topic pervades our religious press and literature; it is talked of at our firesides; it is often the theme of the social circle; and yet the popular mind has only a vague and indefinite idea of what is meant by it. Very few persons could give a definition of the word *church* which would be full and accurate, or even satisfactory to themselves.

1. The original, scriptural idea of the Church is the *great associated company* of all that *have been, are, or shall be*, saved, from the fall of man to the end of time. This is "the mystical body of Christ." This Church has no boundaries but the practical limits of his atoning work, who proclaimed, "Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out." All are *one* in him.

2. This oneness in Christ Jesus is expressed and encouraged, by *outward union* with the great body of *professed* believers, whose essential *visibility* consists in the proper acknowledgment of "one Lord, one Faith, and one Baptism." This constitutes the Church *visible*—the nominal kingdom of heaven upon earth; the net which encloses bad fish as well as good; the field in which the tares and the wheat grow together; the flock which, in the guise of sheep's clothing, shelters grievous wolves; the society into which "false teachers *privily*"—sometimes *openly*—"bring damnable heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them."

3. This great, general, *visible* body of professed believers is composed of a vast number of local associations or societies, each one of which, under various forms of outward administration, is called a *Church*.

The Church is spoken of in the Scriptures, in these threefold aspects, so unlike each other in many particulars that they constitute, in reality, three separate and distinct bodies. And yet there are points of contact and relationship in which they are so intimately intermingled and joined together, that the plain and broad line of demarcation which Scripture and reason have distinctly drawn between them, is continually overlooked. Out of this blindness and confusion, have naturally and necessarily flowed the most serious errors, the most intolerable assumptions and the most

abject bondage. This was the complaint of our own great Hooker nearly three hundred years ago: "For lack of diligent observing the difference between the Church of God *mystical* and *visible*, the oversights are neither few nor light that have been committed." Bishop McIlvaine, referring to the false views arising from this very error, says: "They affect the whole system of Gospel doctrine. They change materially the answer to the question, What is it to be a Christian?" It is essential, in our reading of the Scriptures and religious books, in our preaching and in our conversation, that we have definite ideas as to the meaning of this much perverted and much abused word *church*. Our desire for Christian unity, or Church unity, will then rise above a vague sentiment. We shall at least ascertain whether we are longing for a real *spiritual unity*; or for an *outward union*, which will represent, and, as it were, render visible, the unity that already exists; or for a mere *uniformity* in matters that are not essential, and which, without spiritual unity, has neither significance nor value.

The unity for which our Saviour prayed, and which the Word of God enjoins, is not *uniformity* in outward matters or even in the circumstantialia of the *faith*. The great law which pervades God's kingdom of nature, of providence and of grace is, *unity in diversity*. No two trees, plants, flowers, or even blades of grass are precisely alike; and yet the unity of each species is so distinctly preserved, that no person could easily mistake one for the other. So of the animal creation. The species are distinct. There is a unity in each class, and yet no two are exactly alike. No two human beings are precisely similar to each other in personal appearance, temperament, mental characteristics, or taste.

The human family, although it is composed of many varieties of color and physiognomy, living in different parts of the world under various forms of civil government and social life, is still but one family. These analogies are endless. In regard to matters that are not essential to the spiritual unity of believers, we should, therefore, naturally look for diversity in the kingdom of grace. We find it strikingly illustrated in the character and lives of the apostles and their disciples, and fully recognized and provided for in the Word of God. It is unphilosophical, unscriptural, and in the highest degree unreasonable, to expect every point of belief and practice in religious matters to be measured and prescribed by a rigid rule of uniformity. The spirit which prompts this demand, is wicked as well as intolerant, and as foolish as it is illiberal. Men differ naturally in intellectual force and character, in temperament, in their physical and even, in one sense, in their moral constitution, in habits and in

social and external influences. God, who knows our frame, divides to every man severally as He will, his own measure of the Spirit, and the result is an infinite variety of spiritual development, and even of conscience and opinion.

Thousands of propositions and inferences are found in the Scriptures. It is plain, that nothing short of a miracle, which would destroy the freedom of the will and of the mind, could prevent this variety in opinion in regard to many of them, especially when we remember, in connection with the other circumstances named, the corruption of the human heart, bewildering the judgment and confusing the perceptions, in respect to spiritual truth.

Freedom of inquiry will always lead to diversity in opinion, where the mind depends upon moral evidence. It is so in politics, in questions of trade, in social matters, and in regard to nearly every thing except the exact sciences. It is so in religious questions. But there is a limit to this variety. It cannot be allowed to deny or obscure the essential *unity* of the *faith*. This is the revelation of the character, purposes and law of God, who is One, for the instruction, comfort and guidance of man; who also presents a touching unity in his corruption, his alienation, his guilt and, therefore, in his spiritual necessities. In his sinfulness and in his wants, there is no variety; although, when uninstructed by revelation, he gives various expressions to his wants, by a variety of religions. *One* God has made the race of *one* blood; *one* tempter betrayed it; *one* ruin followed; *one* Saviour has provided *one* ransom; all are passing to *one* judgment-seat, to receive their eternal allotments from *one* Judge. These unities of man, as well as the unity of God, demand one faith—one in all points that are *essential* to it as a *system* of *saving truth*.

The atoning work of the God-man, Jesus Christ, is the great central fact and truth in this system. Here we see the perfections and the purposes of God revealed, the natural condition, the character and the destiny of man displayed, and the divine agency set forth, by which Christ "is made of God unto us, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption." His position, relations, and office, are all peculiar. He came, not so much to elucidate truth and enforce duty, as to revolutionize those relations which are the very fountain of duty. There is satisfaction in his obedience, atonement, in his sufferings, and redemption in his blood. The sum of the Gospel is, "We are complete in Him." The burden of its message is, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us." "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for

ours only, but for the sins of the whole world." This is the fundamental truth and idea of divine revelation, in all the instructions, predictions, ceremonies, types, and shadows of the Old Testament, and it holds a still more prominent place in the life and doctrine of Christ, and in the teaching of his apostles. This one Lord and one faith, implies one Spirit, the great Teacher, under whose inspirations the faith is given, and by whose indwelling grace it is received. "No one can say that Jesus is the Lord but by the Holy Ghost."

While we have no right to demand *uniformity*, in any of the externals or circumstantialia of religion, we must insist upon *absolute oneness* in all the *essentials* of the faith. Defect here is not simply serious and injurious, it is *fatal*. Where *truth* is *vital*, *error* is *deadly*. Salvation for man is found only in the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ. "There is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved." He is "a *thief* and a robber," who attempts to climb to heaven in any other way. "He *is* the way," and no man can find access to the Father but by Him. Vital union with Christ, by a faith which recognizes these great principles, constitutes each believer a true member of His mystical body. So far all true Christians agree. A Christian, who denies that he needs a Divine Saviour, rejects Christ's proper lordship, and spurns the offices of the Divine Spirit, is a contradiction in terms. Those who deserve the title, believe in the fall, the sinfulness, the guilt, and the helpless condition of man by nature; the gracious interposition of God in his behalf through the atoning work of a Divine Saviour, accepted in faith by the penitent soul, and applied in its saving efficacy by the Holy Ghost, the enlightener and sanctifier; the renewal through the same divine agent of the depraved nature in the image of God, and the illustration and proof of that renewal, in a life adorned with the graces and fruits of the Spirit.

The Word of God guards the essentials of this faith, with a watchful jealousy, and insists upon soundness in it, with a frequency and an earnestness which it shows in nothing else.

This "*one faith*" is the priceless jewel committed to the care of the Church, visible and mystical. Each member is enjoined to "examine himself" continually, "whether he be in the faith," and all are to "contend earnestly for it," "striving together for the faith of the Gospel." No such injunctions are found in regard to any outward matters, even of church polity, or the transmission of the ministry. The main requisition in regard to that was, that it should be committed to men who were "sound in the faith." Neither the ministry, the church, nor the sacraments would exist; they would have neither significance nor value, without the faith. Other things

may be valuable, important, and, in their place and for their end, necessary; but the *supremacy of the faith* is everywhere carefully maintained. It is obvious in all those passages which describe or define either a local or the general church visible. "Unto the Church of God which is at Corinth" (a local church); "to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints (this is its definition and description), *with all*, that, in *every place*, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours"—the church at large, also defined and described. Division was then rife at Corinth; St. Paul's authority and claims were openly denied, but they recognized the Master, and in this fact, he found a bond of union which no outward circumstances could sever. The same apostle writes of "ministers of strife and envy," who preached Christ of contention, for the purpose of adding affliction to his bonds—thus most wickedly and grossly violating outward order; "notwithstanding, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice."

The gracious benedictions of the apostles were coupled with no reservations in regard to *outward matters*, or any of the *circumstantials of the faith*, but, "grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity." Their sentence of excommunication was based on a rejection of the substance of the *faith*: "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema." Further still, the standard by which the apostolic Christians were to judge the claims of the *ministry*, was their *soundness in the faith*. They were expressly forbidden to receive or welcome any man who preached *strange doctrine*, whatever other claims he might present. Even the great chosen apostle to the Gentiles writes, "Though we or an angel from heaven preach any other Gospel unto you, let him be accursed." This was no sudden ebullition of feeling; no mere extravagance of language. It is so essential and vital, that he emphasizes it, by repeating it immediately, in nearly the identical words. What is still more worthy of notice, this strong language refers to the false teaching of the apostle Peter, whom he "withstood to the face, because he was to be blamed," for corrupting the faith. In the epistles of the Spirit to the seven churches of Asia, we find the same thing. The candlestick was in danger of being removed from its place in Ephesus, not because the angel there "had tried them that *said* they were *apostles*, and were not, and had found them liars," but because "the church had left its first love." Sardis is encouraged, because there are "a few names there that have not defiled their garments." The angel of Smyrna is praised for his jealousy and faithfulness in guarding the truth.

A woe is denounced upon Laodicea, because of her lukewarmness in the faith, and that self-righteousness which detracts from the glory of the Saviour. An open door, which no man can shut, is set before the angel of Philadelphia, because he has kept the *word of Jesus*, and has not denied His name. The angel of Pergamos is commended for not denying the faith, but blamed for tolerating them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. This is a fair specimen of the spirit of the New Testament. The *faith* is the main thing. The jewel is much more important and valuable than the casket. All who possess this are members one of the other, by virtue of their union with a common head. In view of this, need we wonder at the Scriptures' denunciation of that Diotrephian spirit, "which loves to have the pre-eminence, neither doth it itself receive the *brethren*, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the *Church*?"

As there is but one Lord and one faith, so there can be but one baptism, and therefore only one Church. This is true, whether we refer to the *original* idea of the Church, or to that body of *professed* Christians, which is its visible representative on the earth. "By one spirit we are all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles." We "are all one in Christ Jesus," "in him we are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit." "God hath knit together his elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of His Son." By virtue of this relation, they are one in heart and mind, and faith and hope. This is the unity of the Spirit, which binds together in the most enduring and endearing bonds all whose names are registered in the Lamb's book of life. This is a glorious, sanctified Church, "not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing," "the bride," "the Lamb's wife," "the king's daughter all glorious within." "Chosen in him before the foundation of the world," and everlastingly united to him, she is joint-heir with Christ to all things. With this Church he has promised to be "to the end of the world," and that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." It is of this Church that the most glorious things are spoken. This is "the Holy Catholic Church," the great community of saints, which both the Apostles' and the Nicene Creed set forth as an object, not of *sight*, but of *faith*. It is an article of *belief*, like the existence and character of God.

The standards and standard writers of the Church of England, and of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, state this doctrine with the utmost precision and fullness.

Referring to the Creeds, Cranmer says in his Catechism, "This word *Church* doth not here betoken a temple builded of timber and stone, nor *men* who are visibly under the same ecclesiastical regimen,

but it signifies a *company* of men, lightened with the spirit of Christ, who do receive the Gospel. This Christian Church is a communion of saints, that is, all that be of this communion or company, be one body under Christ their head, and this congregation receiveth of Jesus Christ all spiritual riches and gifts that pertain to sanctification, and these be common to the whole Church of Christ, and every member of the same." The Catechism of Edward VI. says:—"The Apostles and ancient fathers called this *Ecclesia*, a congregation or assembly. This Church, which is an assembly of men called to everlasting salvation, is both gathered together and governed by the Holy Ghost, which thing, since it cannot be perceived by *bodily sense* or light of nature, is, for good reason, reckoned among things that are known by *belief*." So Hooker:—"Whatsoever things we read in Scripture concerning the endless love and saving mercy which God sheweth to His Church, the only proper subject thereof is the *Church of Christ*, which we properly term his *mystical body*." Jeremy Taylor says:—"The Church is the body of Christ, but the mere profession of Christianity makes no one a member of Christ, and consequently not of this Church; nothing but faith which works by love. Men may agree to call the universality of *professors*, the *Church*, but they are so only by denomination of law and common speaking, not in mystical union and proper relation to Christ. They are not the house of God, the temple of the Holy Ghost. They are not the Holy Catholic Church." Hear Hooker again:—"This Church cannot be *sensibly* discerned by men, for the parts thereof are, some in heaven already with Christ; and the rest that are on earth, although their *persons* be visible and their characters may to some extent be judged by their works, yet we do not certainly and infallibly discern under that property whether they are of that body. Only our minds, by intellectual conceit, are able to apprehend that such a real body there is—collective, because it containeth a huge multitude; a body mystical, because the mystery of their conjunction is removed altogether from sense. The marks which distinguish those who are of this Church are known only to God, who seeth their hearts and understandeth their secret cogitations." I might quote, almost without limit, from our standards and leading divines to the same effect. They unite in testifying that the extravagant theories and claims which some individuals of narrow minds and uninspirited judgments have set up, are as unauthorized by their own Church as they are opposed to the Spirit of the Gospel and the teaching of God's word.

But there is also one *Church visible* often spoken of in the Scriptures. It is a society whose main element of *visibility* is the outward profession of the faith in the prescribed way. This involves the ne-

cessity of *officers*, and our Lord "hath set such in the Church for the edifying of the body of Christ." Their badges of union and distinction from the world are two rites, ordained by Christ, which we call sacraments. One initiates into this society, and the other aids in maintaining their fellowship. The Scriptural idea of the whole *visible Church*, or of any *branch of it*, is a society acknowledging one Lord, professing the true faith, officered by a recognized ministry, and incorporated under the due administration of the sacraments. So precisely our XIXth Article defines it:—"The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same." This, and the XXIIIrd Article which defines ministerial authority, as every well-informed person knows, were purposely framed in *very general terms*, so as not to exclude from the definition and description, the non-episcopal Churches of Scotland and the Continent of Europe. Finding this open confession of one Lord, this open profession of one faith, and a ministry which, in our standards and by our history, we recognize as competent to the due administration of the sacraments, "according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same," we find essentially one body, visible as well as invisible. A great army, with its divisions and *corps*: its cavalry and infantry and artillery; its engineers, its sappers and miners, each under its own commander, distinguished by its own colors, and doing its own work, is yet but *one body*, subject to one head, fighting under one leader, and co-operating for a common end. The visible Church is, in the same way, virtually one. How shall we make this fact more plain that our Saviour's prayer may be answered, "that they all may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me?" By overlooking our points of difference, which are not essential; and recognizing our points of agreement, which are vital. We must realize that we are one in *fact*, before we shall be ready to become one in *form*. *Outward union*, without *inward unity*, has neither true significance nor value. It is a misrepresentation. It symbolizes a falsehood. The remedy for our differences is not to be found in compacts, or legislation, or in compromises, but in clear views of the Gospel, in a more comprehensive and catholic spirit, but above all, in a larger measure of the constraining love of Christ. The root of the difficulty lies in our unsanctified natures. There envies, rivalries, party spirit and discord find the aliment on which to feed and grow. We need, in all the Churches and in all our hearts, a baptism as in flames of fire from the Holy Ghost, a closer communion with God, and an increase

of the power of vital religion. We must go up to the fountain-head, and cleanse the spring at its source, if we would have the stream clean and pure. The order of nature is from particulars to generals. When we each learn to love "the catholic Church," "the blessed company of all faithful people," and bear constantly in affectionate and grateful remembrance the precious truth that we "are all one in Christ Jesus," and thus "every one members one of another," we shall have a foundation for outward union, on which we can all stand as brethren, if not as equals. Having gained this essential point, all else that is needful will follow. In our eagerness for the shadow, let us not forget the substance; let us not talk of *outward union*, while we overlook the blessed *unity* which must previously exist, to give it meaning or value or even render it tolerable. The visible Church is still militant. It is like a fleet struggling upon a storm-tossed sea. I am sure that the particular ship in which I am embarked, though buffeted by winds without, and agitated by disloyalty and dissensions within, is freighted with blessings for all who will avail themselves of her abundant provisions. She is pre-eminently fitted for any service. I have, even yet, an abiding confidence in the success of her exalted mission. She is richly laden with Scripture truth, and as I believe, governed by apostolic order; but I am thankful to find so many "that bear her company." They have all been launched since she was, but the compass by which each one steers, points to the one star of Bethlehem; they all sail under the same flag, the glorious banner of the Gospel; they are directed by one commander, the great Captain of our common salvation; they are wafted by the same breezes, the breathings of the Spirit; they consult the same chart, the revealed Word of God; they are assailed by the same tempests, "from the world, the flesh, and the devil;" they are tossed on the same billows of opposition and trial, and they are seeking a common haven of eternal rest. Let us seek to realize this, and if there must be emulation among us, let us "strive together for the faith of the Gospel."



